

Memoir of Jean N. Nicollet /

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MEMOIR OF JEAN N. NICOLLET. BY HON. HENRY H. SIBLEY.

The Executive Committee has been pleased to impose upon me as a member of the Society, the duty of preparing for its records, a notice of the life of an eminent individual, now no more, whose name is identified with the early history of the region at present embraced within the limits of Minnesota. To the scientific explorations of Nicollet , our Territory is indebted for much of the interest with which it is regarded in all portions of the Union, the results of those labors having been communicated in a form and under auspices the most favorable for their publicity, while the statements made under the sanction of his distinguished name, precluded all doubt of their correctness in the minds of the community at large.

I approach the subject with much diffidence, not only because I am deeply sensible of my inability to do it justice, but because my time has been so much engrossed by my public duties as to prevent me from devoting to it the research necessary to make available all the materials which might otherwise have been collected. Thus much I may be permitted to state, by way of apology for the imperfect manner in which the task has been performed.

For the most of what may be found interesting in this memoir, I am most happy to acknowledge my obligations, and those of the Society, to Col. J. J. Abert , Chief of the U. S. Engineer Corps, under whose immediate supervision 184 the subject of this paper prosecuted his investigations for some years, and with whom he was on terms of the closest intimacy. That gentleman very kindly furnished me with a sketch of his friend's career, written by himself, and, permitted me to make copious extracts therefrom, which are embodied in the following pages.

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It will be found in the case of Nicollet , as in manifold others, where the life of an individual has been mainly devoted to the service of his fellow-men, in the higher branches of science, that disappointment and unkind treatment had clouded and embittered the very hours thus benevolently spent, and that Death finally set his seal upon labors destined to produce great and beneficent results to the human race, without the consolation being afforded to the departing spirit of feeling that the importance of those labors had been duly appreciated.

Jean N. Nicollet was born in the year 1790, at Cluses, a small town, capital of Fansigny in Savoie. His parents were poor, and he was consequently reduced to the necessity of gaining a subsistence by playing upon the flute and violin, before he had reached the tender age of ten years.—He was then apprenticed to a watch-maker, and remained with him until he was eighteen years old, when he removed to Chambry, the capitol of Savoie, where he followed his occupation, at the same time prosecuting his studies in mathematics, for his proficiency in which science he received a prize. From Chambry he returned to Cluses, and there gave lessons in mathematics, he himself receiving instruction in Latin and other languages. He continued this course of life for about two years, when he went to Paris and was admitted in the first class of L'Ecole Normale, and soon afterwards he was placed in charge of the mathematical course in the College of "Louis Le Grand."

It was in 1818 that Nicollet published his celebrated 185 letter to M. Outrequin Banquier , "on assurances having for their basis, the probable duration of human life." This little work gained for him a high reputation, affording to the Assurance Societies the prospect of establishing their regulations upon the more certain basis of mathematical demonstration, and he soon found himself courted by financiers, while at the same time he was admitted into the higher circles of society. Shortly afterwards he wrote for the "Modern Encyclopedia" several articles on *probabilities* and one upon *assurances* . It is stated, that

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his knowledge of the English gave him a great advantage, in being able to consult writers in that language on the Theory of Assurances in applying it to every species of risks.

From 1819 and 1820, may be dated the commencement of his astronomical labors. During those years he made observations upon the lunar spot Manilus, and uniting them with those made by M. Bonvard in 1806, he having discussed the whole in a memoir published in the *Connaissance des Temps* in 1822 and 1823.

On the 21st January, 1821, between six and seven in the evening, he discovered a comet in the constellation of Pegasus, (seen on the same day and at the same hour by PeNs at Marseilles,) and from his own observations and those of the astronomers and the observatory, he completed its parabolic elements. On the 22d of April, 1830, he discovered another comet between the constellations Delphinus and Equileus, but was on that occasion preceded by M. Gambart of Marseilles, who had already seen it on the 21st of the same month.

We are besides indebted to Nicollet for observations and computations of other comets, among which may be mentioned that of 1823, whose elements he computed. He had already labored some time in the Observatory at Paris when, in 1822, he entered the "Bureau des Longitudes" as 186 an adjunct. His position was thus for the future most honorably established. The publications of the Observatory will show the part he took in the observations.

About the same time, he was employed by the "Bureau des Longitudes" to perform an important work in connection with other distinguished savans, in determining the figure of the earth, by comparing a measured terrestrial arc with the celestial arc corresponding to it. The results of those labors were published in the "*Connaissance des Temps*" for 1829. M. Nicollet also published in 1828, a memoir in a new computation of the latitudes of certain places, to serve as a supplement to that great work, the "*Base du Systeme Metrique*."

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Previous to 1825, M. Nicollet received the decoration of the Legion of Honor, and had also been attached, as Professor, to the Royal College of “Louis Le Grand.”—Being, in addition, appointed one of the Inspectors of the Naval Schools, he published in 1829, conjointly with MM. Reynaud and Geraud , a course of mathematics in three volumes, for the use of the candidates for promotion—the second volume, containing geometry and trigonometry, being edited solely by himself.

During a journey to Brest, he determined the horizontal magnetic intensity at that point, for comparison with the intensities at Paris and Brussels. These were made in 1831, and their results inserted in the first volume of the Bulletins. He was named a Corresponding Member of the Royal Academy of Science and Belles Letters at Brussels, and several of his communications inserted in the publications of the Academy.

M. Nicollet had hitherto been fortunate in his financial concerns, and had accumulated a considerable sum of money. Tempted by his uniform success, and being a firm believer in his theory of probabilities and his mathematical combinations, he launched boldly forth upon the sea of speculation, 187 and, as might well have been predicted, he failed, and lost not only his own fortune, but involved others also, and was forced to seek refuge in the United States, his former friends being found among his most bitter and implacable persecutors, *que ne lui pardonnent pas, parcequil n'a pas reussi* .

His arrival in our country in 1832, an entire stranger and with but limited pecuniary means at his disposal, was consequently under very discouraging circumstances. Living chiefly in the South-West, where he occupied himself with some astronomical instruments he had brought with him, he was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of Bishop Change of Natchez, who proved a kind and true friend to him thereafter. He was treated with much warm hospitality in that region, his scientific attainments proving a passport to the best society, and the pleasure he always took in communicating information to others, rendering him an interesting and valuable companion.

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We have now traced the career of M. Nicollet , briefly and imperfectly, down to the period from which may be dated the identification of his name and fame with the history of our own interesting Territory. In the spring of 1835, he set out on his tour to the Upper Mississippi, with a view of exploring that river, and determining its sources with astronomical accuracy. His intention to enter upon this field of labor had been previously made known, for in 1833, the War Department had furnished him with letters of protection and hospitality to the commanding officers and Indian Agents on that frontier. He also received from the Department the loan of certain instruments needed by him, but beyond these inconsiderable aids, he undertook the expedition at his own expense and risk. "We have understood, however, that the intelligent and enterprising house of P. Chouteau , Jr., & Co., of St. Louis, then extensively 188 engaged in the Indian trade, contributed liberally towards M. Nicollet's outfit and expenses, looking for no other remuneration than the general information which would be the result."*

* Col. Abert.

It was in the year 1835, therefore, that my own acquaintance with the subject of this memoir commenced.—Being provided with introductory letters to myself as well as to other individuals ill this part of the country, he called at Mendota soon after his arrival at Fort Snelling, unfolded his plan of operations with the utmost freedom and frankness, and solicited my aid and co-operation in his enterprize. In those days when the nearest settlement of whites was nearly three hundred miles distant, the advent of a decent and intelligent visitor was hailed with delight. Whatever assistance could be rendered to advance the objects of such an individual, if proper in themselves, was cordially given by the officers at the military posts, as well as by those men in charge of trading stations. All were equally anxious for his success, and M. Nicollet soon found himself equipped at comparatively small expense with the means of ascending the Mississippi river. It is not necessary for me to enter into a detail of the results of his expedition. They have been given to the world in the form of a report published by the General Government. M.

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Nicollet was absent several months, and he returned to Fort Snelling late in the autumn, to prosecute his studies, and to calculate the astronomical observations he had made during his tour. A portion of the winter following was spent by him at my house, and it is hardly necessary to state that I found in him a most instructive companion. His devotion to his studies was intense and unremitting, and I frequently expostulated with him upon his imprudence in thus over-tasking the strength of his delicate frame, but with little effect. When 189 the weather was auspicious, telescope in hand, he would spend hours of the cold winter-nights of our high latitude in astral observations. He continued his labors until the opening of spring called him to encounter the privations and sufferings necessarily attendant upon a long sojourn in the wilderness. Such was the enthusiasm of his nature, that he submitted to all physical inconveniences without murmuring, and as of no moment when compared with the magnitude of the enterprise in which he was engaged.

In 1838, he visited Washington City with his maps and journals, and was there greeted with much warmth by kind and sympathizing friends who had watched his undertaking with interest, and who extended to him such aid as could be offered without offence to his sensitiveness and delicacy. Among these may be named the Hon. Joel R. Poinsett , then at the head of the War Department, and Col. Abert , Chief of the Engineer Corps of the U.S. Army. These gentlemen were kindred spirits, who could appreciate and esteem the character of Nicollet . Mr. Poinsett was not only a literary man, but he was possessed also of respectable scientific acquirements, and his comprehensive mind at once led him to perceive the importance to the country of securing the materials collected by Nicollet in his excursions, and of engaging him in further explorations of the vast basin lying between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. To this end, he authorized the Chief of Engineers to make arrangements with M. Nicollet for the transfer of his maps and journals to the Government, and to secure his further services. These, with a man like Nicollet , who panted for greater opportunity to distinguish himself, were soon perfected, and he became a Government officer, with abundant means to carry out his projects. He proceeded on his mission,

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resolved to do credit to him self, as well as to the Government which had honored him with its confidence.

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The eventful career of John C. Fremont may be said to have commenced with this expedition, he having been attached to it by order of the Secretary of War. M. Nicollet ascended the Missouri River with his company to Fort Pierre, from which point he diverged across the prairies to Devil's Lake, and thence to the head of the Minnesota river and down its valley to Mendota. On his way he visited the Pipe Stone Quarry (so called) on the Coteau de Prairie, explored the Undine Region in which some of the numerous tributaries of the Blue Earth take their rise, and I well remember the glowing terms which he used in speaking of the Valley of the Minnesota, characterizing it as the garden spot of the North-West, and as destined, at no distant day, to be the happy home of an industrious and enterprising population.

M. Nicollet frequently referred to Col. Fremont , in his conversations with me, as a young man of more than ordinary promise, and stated his conviction, that the modest and unassuming youth, if his life should be spared, would, in due time, carve out for himself a distinguished position among the *savans* of the age.

I was favored by a visit of some weeks from both these gentlemen; but while I was rejoiced at the success that had crowned their efforts, I could not conceal from myself the fact, that the arduous nature of his labors was rapidly wearing away the health of Nicollet , and that his delicate frame could not much longer withstand the workings of the fiery spirit within.

One of the results of Nicollet's labors was the magnificent map which bears his name, and which has associated it with that of our own section of country for all time to come. Although that map is imperfect in its details, as all must necessarily be that are not based upon an actual survey of all the region therein delineated, yet its main points 191 are remarkable for their correctness, especially of those parts which he visited in person. The

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accuracy of his astronomical observations, where they have been applied to determine the latitude and longitude of particular places, remains to this day unquestioned. The report submitted by him to the War Department, in 1841, of his explorations, and printed by order of Congress, was brief but very satisfactory, and tended to direct the attention of the reading community to the country he had described with so much ability.

I have reason to know that M. Nicollet had collected ample materials for a work to consist of several volumes, relating principally to what is now Minnesota, in which it was his intention to elaborate the several departments of its geology, topography and geographical position, and many interesting topics connected with the Indian tribes, to be found therein, the structure of their several languages, and to state well-grounded opinions as to the condition of the races which preceded them. Such a preposition from the pen of a man so competent as himself to do justice to the subject, would have been of inestimable advantage, not only to our Territory, but to the whole Union. His premature death prevented the fulfilment of this design, and his papers have passed into the possession of different individuals, some of whom are unwilling to part with such cherished memorials of a departed friend. There is, consequently, little reason to hope that a publication will ever be made, embodying information comprised in those materials, at all commensurate in importance with the vast amount of scientific labor expended in their collection.

Nicollet was fully satisfied that the soil of Minnesota would eventually prove to be rich in mineral deposits. I saw in his possession specimens of virgin copper and ore of the same metal, collected by him on the Upper Mississippi, 192 not far from the mouth of the Crow Wing River. The precise spot where the discovery was made, I am induced to believe Nicollet never disclosed, unless, perhaps, confidentially to the Government, as he did not deem it proper that the knowledge acquired by him while in the public employ, should be used for purposes of private emolument.

It is not my purpose to follow the subject of this paper in his researches. His report, already referred to, affords a synopsis of his explorations in this region. Let it suffice to state,

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that with less than an ordinary share of physical strength, and with the seeds of disease already implanted in his system, he endured fatigues and privations, overcame obstacles, and accomplished results, which might well be regarded as extraordinary in any man in the full vigor of robust health.

Leaving, therefore, the subject of Nicollet's investigations in the North-West, let us briefly trace his eventful career to its termination. His health was so seriously affected after his return to Washington in 1830, that from that time forward he was incapacitated from devoting himself to the accomplishment of his work as exclusively as he had previously done. Still he labored, but it was with depressed spirits and blighted hopes. He had long aspired to a membership in the Academy of Sciences of Paris. His long continued devotion and valuable contributions to the cause of science, and his correct deportment as a gentleman, alike entitled him to such a distinction. But his enemies were numerous and influential, and when his name was presented in accordance with a previous nomination, to fill a vacancy, he was black-balled and rejected. This last blow was mortal. True, he strove against the incurable ancholy which had fastened itself upon him, but his struggles waxed more and more faint, until death put a period to his sufferings on the 18th September, 1844.

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Even when he was aware that his dissolution was near at hand, his thoughts reverted back to the days when he roamed along the valley of the Minnesota River. It was my fortune to meet him for the last time in the year 1842 in Washington City. A short time before his death I received a kind but mournful letter from him, in which he adverted to the fact that his days were numbered, but at the same time he expressed a hope that he would have strength sufficient to enable him to make his way to our country, that he might yield up his breath and be interred on the banks of his beloved St. Peters.

It would have been gratifying to his friends to know that the soil of the region which had employed so much of his time and scientific research, had received his mortal remains

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into its bosom, but they were denied this melancholy satisfaction. He sleeps beneath the sod, far away, in the vicinity of the Capital of the nation, but his name will continue to be cherished in Minnesota as one of its early explorers, and one of its best friends. The astronomer, the geologist, and the christian gentleman, Jean N. Nicollet , will long be remembered in connection with the history of the North-West.

“Time shall quench full many A people's records and a hero's acts— Sweep empire after empire into nothing; But even then shall spare this deed of thine, And hold it up, a problem few dare imitate, And none despise.”

[While this volume was in press, Gen. Sibley presented to the Society a letter, written (in French) by Mr. Nicollet to him, in 1837, so characteristic of the writer, and which breathed so much of his gentle spirit, and enthusiastic devotion to science, it was accepted by the Society for cation in its Collections. Its only appropriate place is in connection with the memoir of Mr. N. and we here insert a very faithful translation 12 194 of it by Mrs. Alice Goodrich , the accomplished wife of Hon. A. Goodrich . It might be here mentioned that the valuable and voluminous papers of Mr. Nicollet relating to this region, were lost after his death: The most persevering search by Gen. Sibley and others, who endeavored to secure them for this Society, were fruitless to discover their fate. W.

Ohio River, Steam-boat Maryland , November 27, 1837.

My dear Mr. Sibley :

It is nearly six weeks since I returned to St. Louis in good health and well pleased with the long journey I had made with our friend Mr. Aitkin . Upon my arrival Mr. Chouteau gave me the good letter which you wrote to me from Pittsburg; truly that letter gave me great pleasure, reminding me as it did, of a land to which I had just bid *Farewell* for ever, where we spent such agreeable moments together, and where your friendly care permitted me to pursue my labors, with ardor. I would have wished to answer you without delay, but you were not in Detroit; and on the other hand, I wished to inform you positively as

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to my movements, which were very undecided during several weeks, owing to a part of my collections having been miscarried on the Mississippi, to the recovery of which I was forced to devote time and anxiety. You know that my project had always been to regain the East by way of Detroit, Niagara, &c. The hope of finding you with your family was a great additional attraction in that direction, but I learned from time to time that you were yet in the midst of the dangers, which the *beauties* of the Atlantic cities offer to your heart, and when I had recovered my collection and accomplished the work which detained me in St. Louis. the bad season came to warn me it was too late, and that nothing better remained for me to do, than to hasten and pass the Alleghanies by the shortest route. Behold me then, on my way to Baltimore, with all my baggage, instruments, pebbles, plants, birds, reptiles, quadrupeds, medicine bags, moccasins, calumets &c. &c., and in company with Mr. P. Chouteau , Jr., who is to spend the winter in New York. and with whom I would like you to meet and remain several days.

Now, my friend, these are my winter plans: I shall deposit my baggage in Baltimore, where I shall spend two weeks, thence to Washington till Christmas; in the month of January, New York and Boston. Tell me your projects, I pray; as I am free in my movements, there is nothing I would not do or modify, for the pleasure of seeing you again. You have been so good to me, that my affection and gratitude are yours forever, and always and every where it will be sweet to prove 195 this to you, as it will also 'be agreeable to me to learn that you still preserve a remembrance of me. It will be difficult to express the sorrow we experienced, Mr. Aitkin and I, when we returned to St. Peters, and learned that you had left. My heart was heavy and my eyes filled with tears, when Mr. Anderson told me how you had several times expressed regret at leaving me behind Our isolation appeared so great that we only tarried the necessary number of hours to procure men capable of taking me to Prairie du Chien, in my little birch bark canoe. Mr. Aitkin , who has also been so good to me during our whole journey, was kind enough to wait for me, although very much pressed for time, and together we formed a little flotilla to Mr. Dousman's door. The haste with which I proceeded at St. Peters was such that I did not have time to settle my account

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with you. I took the bills with me, and settled with Mr. Dousman , on reaching the Prairie. Comparing your memoranda with mine I discovered an error in your favor of \$25, which you gave me one day in the midst of the occupations with which you were pressed in your office at Fort Snelling. I owe you in all \$350, which I shall pay to Mr. Chouteau (with that he has advanced me since my arrival in St. Louis) as soon as I arrive East. Thanking you once more for these important services, I pray you, my friend, to express also my gratitude to Messrs. Dousman and Anderson , for the zeal with which they treated me.

Write to me: *St. Mary's College, Baltimore*; at all times it is the surest way for your letters to reach me, present or absent. If ever you pass by that city, do not fail to enquire for me of my friends in that beautiful college. Ask for the President, Doctor John Chauche , and tell him you are H. H. Sibley .

I saw the Major and the Sioux on their return from Washington. I learned particulars from that quarter, and several others, but it remains for me to hear from you, whether you are satisfied.

But the Major!!! *Atte Sitcha* .

Adieu, my noble friend; yours heart and soul,

J. N. Nicollet .]